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URBAN BEACHES AS INTEGRAL ELEMENTS OF THE PUBLIC SPACE STRUCTURE IN COASTAL CITIES: COMPARATIVE INSIGHTS FROM CATALONIA AND POMERANIA

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Abstract

Coastlines fulfill diverse economic, protective, and recreational functions, and their physical forms vary widely—from high, steep landscapes such as fjords to low-lying shores characterized by sandy beaches. A particular type of coastline is the beach located within an urban environment. These areas, equipped with various recreational facilities, not only support seasonal tourism but also contribute to year-round outdoor activity, well-being, and emotional restoration for local communities, while complementing the network of urban public spaces. This study examines whether urban sandy beaches in Catalonia (Spain) and Pomerania (Poland) can be considered integral elements of the public-space network and whether their spatial development and functions enable them to operate as such throughout the year. The research employs a mixed qualitative approach combining desk research with field-based assessment across selected case studies from both regions. A comparative analysis was conducted to identify similarities, differences, and emerging patterns in beach development and use.

Key words

city beach, public space, coastal management, beach development, Pomerania, Catalonia.

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1. Introduction

The coastline serves multiple functions—economic, protective, and recreational. It hosts industrial zones and ports dedicated to both freight and passenger transport. Although the city and the port operate synergistically and benefit from each other, they also develop at different speeds, which generates challenges for planners (Krośnicka, 2018). In addition, the coast performs protective functions, acting as a natural buffer against storms and floods and helping

to prevent erosion. Sea-level rise and coastal erosion are issues that influence both urban planning and management, requiring the use of various tools and models (Bagheri et al., 2023). The recreational functions of coastal areas, in turn, revolve around opportunities for water sports, beach leisure, and activities along the shoreline that take advantage of the natural features of the sea (Jiménez, Valdemoro, 2018).

One type of coastal environment is the beach, which may be sandy or gravel. Recreational facilities such as volleyball courts, playgrounds, and outdoor

gyms have been developed there, transforming the functionality of these spaces. Moreover, beaches located in cities effectively complement the network of urban public spaces. On the one hand, during the warmer months, people visit them individually or in groups to sunbathe or simply relax. On the other hand, in winter, together with promenades and piers, beaches become places for walking and spending time outdoors.

Public spaces are the place for everyday sport and leisure. The importance of outdoor spaces were especially significant during COVID-19 lockdown. After that experience, the role of open, inclusive, and accessible public spaces has increased significantly. Staying by the sea has a positive impact on well-being. Moreover, such an environment evokes a range of positive emotions, including a sense of safety, awe, or even nostalgia (Severin et al., 2022).

In this context, the following issues arise: can urban beaches, through their spatial development and the functions they provide, be considered public spaces that complement the existing network of public spaces, and are they connected to this network? The aim of this study was to examine the development of urban sandy beaches located in Catalonia, Spain, and in Pomerania, Poland, with particular attention to year-round features that remain accessible to beach users even outside the peak tourist season.

In terms of methodology the research is based on a mixed qualitative approach combining desk research with field-based assessment. Several case studies representing the regions of Catalonia and Pomerania were analysed, followed by a comparative analysis and the formulation of conclusions.

The structure of the article reflects the logical progression of the research process, leading the reader from the theoretical background to the empirical findings and conclusions. The article consists of five sections. Following the introduction, a literature review presents the latest publications related to the topic. The subsequent part outlines the research methods and provides basic information on the selected case studies. In the fourth section, the author discusses the research results and compares them with current literature. Finally, the conclusions are presented, and the overall findings are summarized.

2. State of arts

In recent decades, growing scholarly attention has been devoted to issues related to coastlines and their diverse economic, environmental, and recreational functions. Researchers and practitioners from various

disciplines examine these interdependencies and develop strategies and plans aimed at protecting coastal environmental features, ensuring their sustainable use in the context of port development, and designing recreational spaces that serve both tourists and local communities.

Since the earliest stages of human settlement, cities located near the sea have derived above-average socio-economic benefits from their proximity to the water, including opportunities for maritime transport, access to fisheries, and the use of coastal waters as a natural defensive barrier. An additional advantage was a location at a river mouth, which elevated the settlement's importance and facilitated trade on a broader scale (Pomianowski, Doburzyński, 2021).

Patterns of waterfront development have evolved over time. Waterfronts previously used for industrial purposes are now being redeveloped, opened to local communities, and equipped with small-scale architectural elements, thereby transforming into attractive public spaces (Zhuravleva, Zhuravlev, 2022). Such processes highlight the growing attractiveness of urban areas situated by the water and, consequently, the public spaces that emerge within them.

Another form of waterfront development characterised primarily by recreational functions is the beach. The classification of beaches as public spaces is therefore not new in the literature, as demonstrated in the work of Morgan and Evans (2022), who applied the Public Space Index—an evaluation tool for public spaces across five dimensions developed by Mehta (2013)—to analyse beaches located in Florida, USA. Beaches are more than just places for sunbathing or swimming; they constitute part of the broader network of public spaces (Pinheiro et al., 2009, as cited in Tavares et al., 2022). Examples from around the world reinforce this perspective.

Beaches enrich urban public-space networks in several dimensions. First, they are places for socialising through sport, as shown in research conducted in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. For part of the analysed group, spending time on the beach and playing volleyball even functions as a form of therapy (Tavares et al., 2022). As previously noted, Severin et al. (2022) demonstrated that, beyond social and therapeutic aspects, users of coastal areas and beaches experience a variety of positive and soothing emotions.

Moreover, beaches as well as serving as spaces for recreation and social interaction, form part of the city's cultural landscape. However, anthropogenic pressure drives the commercialisation of these areas, resulting in the haphazard introduction of small-scale infrastructure, which ultimately leads to spatial disorder (Sikora, Załęcki, 2023).

In many European cities, beaches are arranged temporarily during the summer season. Following the example set along the Parisian stretch of the Seine, similar implementations have been introduced in other locations. Some of these initiatives are carried out by municipal authorities, though not all. Examples from Germany illustrate the diversity of operators and the wide range of methods and locations used for creating temporary urban beaches, even in cities without access to the sea (Stevens, 2023).

3. Methods

The research methodology is based on a mixed qualitative approach combining desk research with field-based assessment (Flick, 2004; Czerniawska, 2014). The initial stage involved a review of existing literature on urban beach design and management. Subsequently, two distinct regions — Catalonia (Spain) and Pomerania (Poland) — were selected for further investigation. Both represent leading regions within their respective national contexts, where tourism constitutes a non-dominant but relevant component of the regional economic structure (Eurostat, 2024). Based on this comparative framework, a series of case studies representing cities of different sizes and urban conditions was selected. Subsequent study visits enabled on-site examination, documentation, and evaluation of beach design and management practices. The collected material served as the basis for assessing and valorising the spatial organization, functional qualities, and integration of beaches within the broader urban public space network.

3.1. Catalonia, Spain

Catalonia is an autonomous community and region of Spain located on the Mediterranean Sea along the border with France. The region is home to more than 8 million inhabitants, with Barcelona as its capital and Girona, Lleida, and Tarragona as other major cities (INE, 2024). Catalonia comprises over 600 km of coastline, including approximately 280 km of beaches. Its coastal areas include the well-known Costa Brava, followed by Costa del Maresme, Costa Daurada, Costa del Garraf, and the Barcelona coastline, which can be considered a distinct coastal unit.

In Catalonia, beaches are strongly shaped by the tourism-driven economy on which most municipalities depend. They also constitute key recreational spaces for residents, and 75% of coastal municipalities report that their primary objective in beach management is “to satisfy the recreational needs of users” (Jiménez,

Valdemoro, 2018). In addition to anthropogenic pressures, Catalan beaches also face challenges associated with natural erosion. Moreover, beach perceptions vary depending on the type of user — the quality of Catalan beaches is evaluated differently by local residents and by tourists, and each group is concerned with different aspects (Roca et al., 2009).

3.1.1. Barcelona, Platja de Sant Miquel & Platja de Sant Sebastià

Catalonia is an autonomous community of Spain with a strong cultural, historical, and linguistic identity. It is one of the most developed and influential regions of the country — both economically and politically. Barcelona is both the capital of Catalonia and its largest city, with more than 1.5 million inhabitants within the city proper and nearly 3.5 million residents in the AMB metropolitan area, one of the most densely populated and dynamic regions in Europe. (AMB, 2024).

Within its area there are several beaches, and along most of them a promenade has been laid out. Sant Miquel Beach and Sant Sebastià Beach are located next to each other. The former is situated at the very end of the promenade, next to the W Hotel — a characteristic landmark of Barcelona’s waterfront — and the Nautical Club. The latter is a continuation of the first and stretches toward the Barceloneta district. When experienced on site, they appear to form a single whole, both in terms of development and appearance. Beaches in the metropolitan area are managed by public bodies such as the Àrea Metropolitana de Barcelona (AMB, n.d.).

3.1.2. Badalona, Platja de l’Estació

Badalona is a city of more than 220,000 inhabitants located within the metropolitan area of Barcelona. Owing to a well-developed public transport network and a compact urban fabric, the boundary between the cities remains imperceptible on the ground. The analysed beach is located next to a suburban railway station. Together with Platja del Coco, it occupies a one-kilometer strip along the seashore, divided in half by the Pont del Petroli pier, which is inaccessible to pedestrians. A promenade runs along the beach, and on its opposite side there are squares, a playground, and buildings with restaurants.

3.1.3. Sant Feliu de Guíxols

Sant Feliu de Guíxols is a town located on the Catalan Costa Brava coast in Spain. It is home to 20,000 inhabitants. The mass development of

tourism beginning in the 1960s, and the resulting uncontrolled urban expansion, led to the degradation of the landscape and the town's character. Since the 1980s, with the democratization of local governments and increasing social pressure, municipal policy regarding further tourism development has changed (Sansbelló, 2015). The beach is located in a bay that also contains a marina. A promenade runs along the beach, featuring benches, low walls that also function as seating, and a playground. Parallel to the promenade there is a parking area and a municipal square where a market is held several days a week.

3.1.4. Sant Pol de Mar

Sant Pol de Mar is a small town located in Catalonia, Spain. It has nearly 6,000 inhabitants. The main urban beach (Platja de les Barques and Platja de Sant Pol) is situated directly next to the railway station, and it is separated from the main part of the town by railway tracks, which can be crossed using one of two pedestrian crossings. Despite this, it lies close to the town centre — including its key public spaces and the town hall building. The beach in Sant Pol de Mar serves both as a recreational space and as a site of maritime cultural heritage (Carbonell, 2010).

3.2. Pomerania, Poland

Pomerania is a region in northern Poland situated along the Baltic Sea coastline. Its principal socio-economic nucleus is the Gdańsk–Gdynia–Sopot metropolitan area, which comprises approximately 1.5 million inhabitants. The region constitutes a significant hub for maritime industries, port logistics, tourism, and increasingly for knowledge-intensive and high-technology sectors. At the same time, Pomerania is distinguished by substantial environmental and landscape assets, including an extensive and varied Baltic Sea shoreline, which collectively contribute to its distinctive spatial and developmental profile.

A number of cities and towns are located on the shoreline of the Baltic Sea. Many of the beaches within these areas are typically separated from the urban fabric by a belt of greenery, which in many cases consists not only of dunes, where access is prohibited, but also of coastal forest. In Pomerania, beaches located along the open sea can be distinguished from those situated on the Gulf of Gdańsk; in the latter case, it is possible to identify several examples of urban beaches situated in direct proximity to the built-up city structure.

3.2.1. Gdańsk, Jelitkowo & Brzeźno

Gdańsk, as the capital of the region, is the largest of the Pomeranian cities with a history spanning more than 1,000 years. Its establishment was conditioned by its location at the mouth of the Vistula River, Poland's largest river, flowing into the Baltic Sea. The role of the sea in its history is unquestionable — formerly as a member of the Hanseatic League, a medieval association of port cities; later attacked from the sea by Germany, which marked the beginning of the Second World War; and today as one of the largest cargo ports on the Baltic Sea.

The beach is an important cultural element of Gdańsk, shaping the identity of the city and enabling recreation and social integration (Sikora, Załęcki, 2023). The stretch of Gdańsk's sandy beaches extends for 20 kilometers. It is divided into three main sections — (1) Sobieszewo Island, separated from the mainland by the Vistula Cut and the Śmiała Vistula; (2) Stogi, located between the Śmiała Vistula and the Dead Vistula, where, in addition to a wide sandy beach, the Baltic Hub – Deepwater Container Terminal is situated. The longest section (3) runs from Nowy Port, where a secondary port operates, and continues all the way to the neighbouring city of Sopot, providing nearly 5 kilometers of continuous beach. The beaches are separated from the urban fabric by a belt of dunes and, along most of their length, also by pine forest. The study analysed the beaches in Jelitkowo and Brzeźno as those most strongly integrated with the urban fabric.

3.2.2. Gdynia, City beach

Gdynia is one of the youngest cities in Pomerania, founded in 1926. The city emerged alongside the construction of the seaport, and its founding motto — “A city from the sea and of dreams” — reflects the close relationship between the urban fabric and the sea. Inhabited by nearly 240,000 residents. It is located in the heart of the Gdańsk–Gdynia–Sopot metropolitan area. The municipal beach is located adjacent to the marina. In its immediate vicinity are the Musical Theatre, the Film Centre, the Naval Museum, the Aquarium, and the city's main public space—Kościuszko Square together with the Southern Pier. Along the shoreline runs the Seaside Boulevard, one of the most frequently visited public spaces in the city. For many years, Gdynia has ranked among the best cities to live in Poland, a position resulting from numerous factors such as its urban scale, port character, natural and anthropogenic assets, and consciously implemented urban policies (Szymkowska, 2018).

3.2.3. Sopot

Sopot, similarly to Gdańsk and Gdynia, is situated within the Gdańsk–Gdynia–Sopot metropolitan area, yet it differs from them in character. It is a resort town with a population of approximately 30,000 residents. The beach in Sopot is about 4 km long, and its central section features an almost two-hundred-year-old pier, which in recent years has been expanded to include a marina. The beaches of Sopot, together with the pier and the parks located along the shoreline, have historically constituted—and continue to constitute—important components of the town's therapeutic and tourist infrastructure. The city is regarded as Poland's summer capital and offers a wide range of leisure and entertainment opportunities. Tobis and Michałowski (2010) draw attention to residents' nostalgia for a time when Sopot was a tranquil resort rather than a destination catering to mass entertainment.

3.2.4. Puck

Puck is located in the Pomerania region within the inner part of the Gulf of Gdańsk. However, it differs from them in character. It is a small town with a population of just over 10,000 residents. The municipal beach in Puck is situated a few hundred meters from the slightly elevated town square, which is surrounded by a historic urban layout. The beach is divided into two sections—the first, smaller one located between the marina and the pier, and

the second located on the eastern side of the pier. Together with the square next to the marina, the marina itself, the pier, and the seaside promenade, these beaches form a network of attractive public spaces. Despite its rich cultural heritage, the town of Puck remains an infrequently selected destination among visitors (Nędza, Matlingiewicz, 2022).

4. Results

Although the cities in which the analysed beaches are located differ in size, geographic setting, and climate, their beach developments share many common features. Moreover, despite variations in the number of sunny days and average annual temperatures, their functioning also appears similar and remains strongly focused on the peak season, namely the summer months. The key elements of beach development and the main observations are outlined below.

4.1. Connection with the City

All of the analysed cases are characterised by a close spatial relationship with the urban fabric, as this was one of the research assumptions. However, the degree of proximity varies between the cases. The Catalan examples illustrate a particularly strong proximity between the beach and the nearest buildings, with building façades clearly visible in the spaces linking the beaches with the promenades.



Fig. 1. Walkers on the pier in Pucke.

Source: author's photograph

The beach in Gdańsk is the most distinctly separated from the urban fabric for two reasons. First, the historical centre of Gdańsk was not located on the seashore but along the river, at some distance from the coastline. Second, along most of the coastline, the boundary between the city and the beach is defined by a belt of dunes and a coastal pine forest. The beach and the urban fabric may also be separated by a dune belt or by differences in elevation, as in the cases of Sopot and Puck. Along longer stretches of coastline, this separation is not constant and changes over distance, occasionally bringing the urban fabric closer to the beach.

The beaches are located relatively close to public transport stops, although not all of them meet this condition equally. In nearly all analysed locations, the beach is situated approximately 0.7–2 km from the city's main railway or bus station. In the remaining cases—Gdańsk and Barcelona—despite the considerable distance from the main station, which is understandable given the size of these cities, the beaches are very well connected through the municipal public transport systems.

In view of the above, all of the analysed beaches are accessible by public transport not only to local urban communities but also to visitors.

4.2. Integration with the City's Public Spaces

Not only the connection with the urban fabric and good access to public transport are important for integrating beaches with the city. A further question arises: how do beaches link to the existing network of the city's public spaces? One of the most significant and most immediate public spaces adjacent to beaches are the seaside promenades running parallel to the shoreline. In Barcelona, the promenade and the beach appear to form one coherent space, distinguished only by the change in surface material. In Gdańsk and Sopot, the beach is separated from the promenade by dunes, while in Puck it is divided by a line of trees and situated slightly above the beach level. In Sant Pol de Mar, the beach is connected to a promenade that continues along a further stretch of the shoreline where the beach is no longer present.

In addition to promenades, beaches also connect to urban squares—as in Sant Feliu de Guíxols, where the beach, the square located directly beside it on the city side, and the promenade running between them together form a shared, multifunctional public space. This configuration enables a variety of activities, from walking, to children's play on the playground, to market-day shopping. When a pier extends into the sea, the entrance area—especially in a resort town such as Sopot—becomes a representative space,

often significantly more prominent than the beach itself.

4.3. Addressing diverse needs

The analysis of the spatial development of Catalan and Pomeranian beaches made it possible to draw a key conclusion: city authorities and beach managers are aware of the wide range of users who benefit from these spaces. Public toilets and beach showers located on or near the beaches have become standard features. The spatial arrangement of the beaches offers a variety of elements, some of which remain accessible to users throughout the entire year. These include benches, particularly those located near the entrances or the showers, volleyball courts, and children's playgrounds. In Gdynia, the playground was highly developed, comprising more than 50 individual elements, and the entire area was complemented by wooden pathways that facilitated access for parents with children in strollers. Moreover, the playground was located at the edge of the beach, close to the sanitary facilities, creating a dedicated space for families. In a few cases, additional facilities were identified, such as outdoor exercise areas for adults, pétanque courts, football pitch, lockers for personal belongings, or sculptures. The amenities dedicated to people with specific needs—particularly those with reduced mobility—are most often available only during the peak season.

An interesting aspect is the presence of informal seating areas, particularly the low walls running between the beach and the walkway alongside it, as well as the edges of the wooden paths. Even when benches or other types of seating are available, these walls are frequently used for sitting, leaning, or even eating. Similar to sitting directly on the beach sand, this form of use remains informal in character.

At the entrances to the beaches located within the Barcelona Metropolitan Area (AMB), information boards have been installed explaining the meaning of the flag colours, the services available (e.g. showers, lifeguards, first-aid points, bicycle parking), and the rules and restrictions, which include prohibitions such as walking dogs, camping, lighting fires, or playing music. In addition, each board features an orientation map.

4.3. Summer-oriented infrastructure

Even in the Catalan examples, where the summer season is longer due to the warmer climate, access to such basic facilities as public toilets is limited.

During fieldwork conducted in November, despite very favourable weather conditions (sunny, 20°C), not all municipalities provided access to public toilets. A similar situation occurred in Gdynia. Gdańsk, by contrast, keeps its public toilets open year-round, while Sopot has located one of its public toilets within a popular beachfront bar that operates almost throughout the entire year. Some toilets are available free of charge, while others require a small fee.

4.4. The Only Constant is Change

Just as part of the seasonal equipment disappears from the beaches at the end of the summer season and returns the following year, the permanent infrastructure of the beaches also changes over time. A part of the analysed case-study locations was visited multiple times over the past few years, which



Fig. 2. Playground located at the edge of the city beach in Gdynia.

Source: author's photograph



Fig. 3. At the junction between the promenade and the beach: informal use of low walls, Sant Feliu.

Source: author's photograph



Fig. 4. Sitting at the edge of the wooden path on Sant Miquel Beach in Barcelona.
Source: author's photograph



Fig. 5. Information board at the beach entrance in Badalona.
Source: author's photograph

made it possible to observe that new permanent elements had appeared in some places—for example, playgrounds added to extend the existing offer, as seen in Gdańsk. Conversely, it was also observed that some elements had been removed despite being in good technical condition, such as a children's climbing net in Barcelona.

In the same way that the equipment changes, the patterns of beach use also evolve. During the colder months, sun loungers and blankets brought by beachgoers disappear, and it becomes more common to see individuals, pairs, or larger groups—with or without dogs—walking along the shoreline, not only on the paved promenade but also directly on the sand.

5. Conclusions

The findings of this research demonstrate that Catalonia and Pomerania, despite differences in climate, the number of sunny days throughout the year, as well as their tourist attractiveness and the number of visitors they receive, organise and manage their beaches in a similar way, with a strong focus on the summer season. The research was intentionally carried out outside the period of highest tourist activity to examine the level of infrastructure accessible to local communities once the season has concluded.

Urban beaches serve as complementary elements within the city's network of public spaces. In all of the analysed cases, access routes from the city side are readily available. Moreover, along all of the examined coastlines, promenades run parallel to the shore, forming together with the beaches an attractive setting for walking and leisure activities not only during the summer season.

The development of the beaches includes showers, public toilets, volleyball courts, and playgrounds. Benches are most commonly located along the promenades or at the beach–promenade

boundary. In a few cases, artworks in the form of sculptures or three-dimensional signs bearing the name of the town can also be observed. The most attractive and best-equipped playgrounds are located in areas with intensified tourist activity, particularly on beaches. Stokwicz (2023) notes that this is linked to the high landscape and tourism potential of these sites, providing opportunities for leisure not only for children but also for their caregivers. In nearly all of the analysed case studies, playground elements were present, which further supports these findings. Some elements of the beach infrastructure—particularly those dedicated to people with disabilities—disappear outside the summer season.

There remain, however, unanswered questions and several promising directions for future research. It would be valuable to conduct a study on the functionality of urban beaches as public spaces from the perspective of city residents, using surveys or in-depth interviews. The results of such research, juxtaposed with the findings presented in this article, would reveal whether recreational infrastructure on beaches is necessary for residents to perceive them as attractive public spaces. Another interesting area of inquiry would be a comparison of the development and management of urban beaches located on the coast with those situated along rivers or lakes. In addition, temporary urban beaches—such as the beach along the Parisian section of the Seine or the aforementioned beaches in Germany—could also be distinguished as a separate category for further investigation.

Urban beaches complement the broader network of public spaces not only through their infrastructure and facilities. The mere proximity of the sea appears to be a sufficient attractor for both residents and tourists, encouraging them to use these areas—whether for stationary relaxation or active recreation. Recognising this may lead to urban beaches becoming more visible within municipal planning units, not solely as spaces dedicated to tourists but as integral components of the citywide public-space network that residents utilise throughout the entire year.

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